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Elaine Pedersen, of Mill Valley, finished second among eight women in the Boston Marathon in 1972, the first year women could enter

BY VINCE MAGGIORA/THE CHRONICLE

Ahead of the Pack

Marin runner was among first women at Boston

By Dan Giesin
Chronicle Staff Writer

Elaine Pedersen didn't set out to be a trailblazer. She just liked to run.

But there she was, with seven other women and surrounded by more than 1,200 men, on the starting line of the Boston Marathon in 1972, the first year women were officially allowed to compete in what is perhaps the world's most famous running event.

"It was really an earth-shattering moment to be on the starting line," Pedersen recalled the other day from her Mill Valley home. "The Boston Marathon is the creme de la creme (of road racing). To be there, to be a part of all that was exciting. . . . It was a watershed in many ways."

For more than 70 years, the venerable 26-mile, 385-yard romp from suburban Hopkinton to the John Hancock building in downtown Boston, which will have its 101st running on Monday, had been strictly a male gathering. But in the late '60s, fueled by the burgeoning women's movement and the nascent fitness boom, women began to crash the party, and Pedersen was one of the small handful of "outlaw" runners who competed unofficially in the Boston Marathon between 1967 and '71.

"I kept sending entry forms to (then-race director) Jock Semple, and he kept sending them back, saying, 'You can't do this,'" Pedersen said. "In '72, he did the same thing. But when a friend of mine said women were allowed in that year, I sent it (the entry form) back, and they had to let me race. . . . It was really exciting to think we were going to be able to run in the marathon."

Pedersen, who was 35 at the time and had only taken up running seriously six years before, didn't have great expectations for that auspicious moment. She'd had experience with running in otherwise male-dominated events — she had "liberated" the Dipsea in '66 and ran the Bay to Breakers in '67 — but the Boston Marathon was truly something else.

"I didn't set my sights high enough,"

she said. "I could have, should have trained more and better. . . . In all sports, it takes people a while to believe in what they can do. No one thought that men would break the four-minute mile. I think it takes awhile for people to realize what they are capable of doing."

However, Pedersen, with a bit of luck, was capable of finishing second, nearly 12 minutes behind Nina Kuscik, in that groundbreaking race. A quarter of a century later, she still marvels at the accomplishment.

"People along the course told me I was the third-place woman (behind Kuscik and Kathy Switzer), and I could tell where the other women were by the cheers (along the course)," she said. "But Kathy was running in tights, and it was a hot day, so she had to stop and literally cut them off. But I didn't know I had passed her and was in second until someone (in the crowd) told me I was in second. . . . She (Switzer) was a very good runner, but I got second place because she had to cut her tights off."

Pedersen, who coincidentally

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BY DUKE DOWNEY/THE CHRONICLE, 1972



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ran her fastest of some 20-odd career marathons in that '72 Boston race (completing the course 3 hours, 20 minutes, 38 seconds), said the enormous crowd that traditionally lines the course was a big boost.

"With all those different kinds of people cheering you on, giving you aid ... when you run something like that it really just brings you in," she said. "And I think you have to attribute at least five minutes (off your time) to the people; the encouragement of the people is wonderful."

"The enthusiasm, the support of the crowd is unlike any running experience I've ever had. It's just like the Olympics, only better because the people are right there."

And in that barrier-breaking race it seemed everyone was right there for her and her female co-runners. "There was no feeling of negativity from the other (male) runners," Pedersen said. "And the thing that was interesting was that the crowd all the way was wonderful with their support."

Despite the euphoria of that race ("Kathy Switzer and I were in the gym together afterwards and just smiling about the whole expe-

BOSTON MARATHON

■ **WHEN:** Monday, 9 a.m.
PDT

■ **WHERE:** Hopkinton, Mass.,
to Boston

■ **TV:** ESPN

rience," Pedersen said), she never ran in Boston again.

"I don't know why I never went back," she said wistfully. "That (race) was really an acme. I was so thrilled with that. ... I guess I figured there were other things. I had run it (Boston) three times, and the attraction of doing other things was more appealing."

Although Pedersen has remained active in the West Coast racing scene, still competing strongly in mid-distance events like the Race to the Far Side and the Dipsea, she hasn't run a marathon since 1984, when she competed in a women's-only race put on by Switzer in Paris. An anecdote from that event gives one the feeling that Pedersen isn't overly impressed with her own accomplishments.

"That (race) was a lot of fun," she said. "But when I filled in the (entry) form, the form said what

have you done, and I said I ran in Boston in '74. Kathy sent it back, saying, 'How could forget (1972)? We were there together.'"

Pedersen says she would like to be there again, but because of a bad back, considers marathons a bit too much for her body to withstand. Now, she just gets the vicarious thrill from watching Boston on TV.

"I watch the women's race ... and it's fascinating what they are doing," she said. "Before the '72 marathon, people were wondering whether women were physically capable of running under three hours, and nobody really thought we were. We really didn't think in terms of 2 hours and 30 minutes (or less) that they are doing now."

But the Uta Pippigs and the Rosa Motas of the world, though strides ahead of Pedersen in talent, wouldn't be racking up those eye-popping times if it weren't for people like Pedersen.

"I didn't start out to be a pioneer," Pedersen said, "but it turned out that I was a pioneer. I just started running ... I've had a wonderful time, and I've made so many wonderful friends in the sport."

"I just like to run. It's still my favorite sport."